

# Test Excavations at Fort Hall, Idaho

## Summary Results

The Fort Hall National Historic Landmark, which is located on the Fort Hall Reservation in Bannock County, Idaho, is endangered by seasonal flooding of the Snake River. Consequently, The Archaeological and Historical Services (AHS) at Eastern Washington University was contracted by an inter-agency coalition for test excavations of the property, a National Historic Landmark (so designated in 1961), distinguished as a key trading post for emigrants along the Oregon and California Trails.

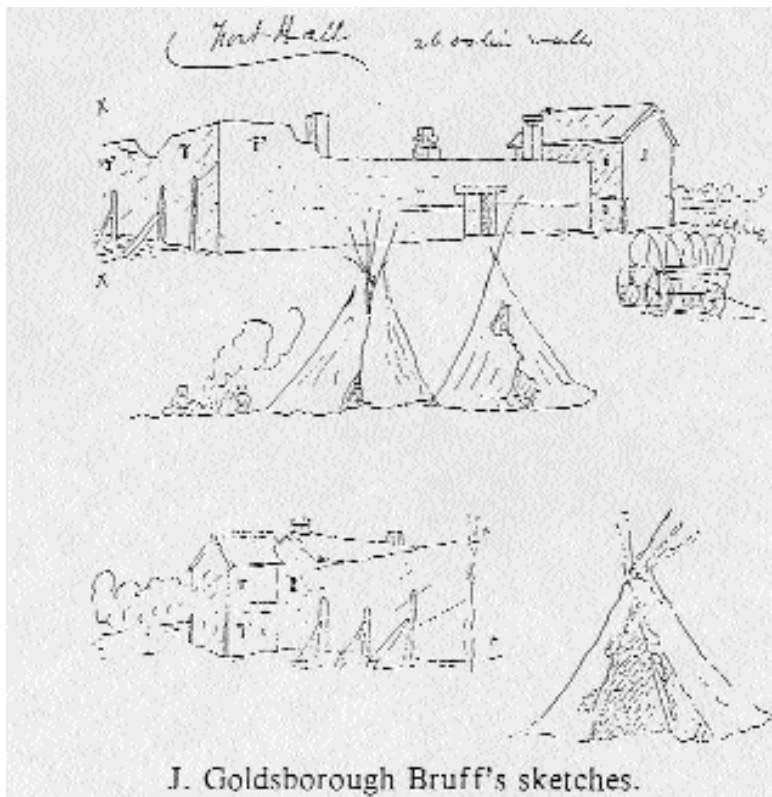
Dr. Jerry R. Galm was principle investigator for this project. Dr. Galm is director of the Archaeological and Historical Services (AHS) at Eastern Washington University in Cheney, WA. Bryn H. Thomas was the project lead archeologist under contract with NPS and the Bureau of Reclamation and manages the AHS office in Vancouver, WA. This summary of the full report, dated April, 1994, was made by Kristine Fairchild, Student Conservation intern in the NPS Trails and Greenways Division.

The inter-agency coalition, in cooperation with the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, included the National Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Bureau of Reclamation. Volunteer labor assistance was provided by the Idaho State Preservation Office along with the federal agencies listed above.

The Tribes and the participating federal agencies are considering strategies to stabilize and protect this archeological resource. Testing performed by AHS complied with applicable federal rules and regulations pertaining to the protection and management of cultural resources, including the stipulations and agreements made with the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Council. The excavations were conducted in a manner that met the Tribes' concerns: (1) That site disturbance be minimized; (2) That there be no disturbance of human remains or burials; and, (3) That all analysis take place on the Fort Hall Reservation. An agreement with the Tribe allowed for wood samples, historic artifacts, and items of non-Indian manufacture to be removed to AHS offices for analysis and reporting.

Fort Hall was constructed in 1834 by Nathaniel Wyeth, a Massachusetts businessman associated with the Columbia River Fishing and Trading Company. He developed plans for an American trading company that would compete with the Hudson's Bay Company by exporting barreled salmon and setting up a trading post. The Fort was a squared structure built with cottonwood logs and situated along the Snake River near the mouth of the Portneuf River above American Falls. The persistent competition from the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was one of the major factors contributing to the downfall of Wyeth's business. Wyeth sold the post to the HBC in 1837, just three years after it was constructed.

The Fort continued to function as a supply post for the Company's regional trapping brigades, and eventually became a mercantile center for trade. Fort Hall's most significant time period was the 1840s when it was renowned as a stop for emigrants along the Oregon Trail, and later 49ers hastening to the California gold fields. It also carried on a flourishing trade with Mormon settlers after their arrival in the area in 1847. The decline of the fur and mercantile trade, which also coin-



cided with increasing Indian hostilities, brought about the abandonment of Fort Hall in 1856. Seasonal traders and U.S. Army troops occupied the Fort, but that only lasted for a very short time. In 1862 and 1864, summer floods left the Fort uninhabitable.

In the early-20th century, local civic organizations and individuals developed an interest in commemorating the Oregon Trail emigration. There was, however, considerable confusion as to the exact location of Fort Hall. A stone monument was constructed by Ezra Meeker in 1906 at the site of the "Abodes," an 1864 stagecoach station, which some claimed to incorporate the remnants of Fort Hall. In 1916, this site was found to be incorrect, and the monument was correctly relocated in 1920. Difficulties identifying the correct location arose from contradictory historic references to places and distances and changes in the Snake River environment.

The 1993 test excavations sought primarily to verify as to whether or not this site is indeed the Nathaniel Wyeth (1834-1837) and Hudson's Bay Company's (1837-1856) Fort Hall, as the historical records suggest. In order to verify the location, archeological test excavations were conducted at the purported Fort site during the autumn of 1993 to see if they could corroborate a variety of 19th-century, first-hand descriptions of the Fort. Three 5x5' grid units and 60 subsurface probes were excavated. Adobe foundations from the southeast bastion, the west stockade wall, a building along the west wall, and artifacts associated with mid-19th-century Hudson's Bay Company sites were found. These data, along with a review of the historical descriptions of Fort Hall, support the conclusion that the National Landmark encompasses the Wyeth-Hudson's Bay Company Fort Hall archeological site.

*Excavation of the southeast corner of Fort Hall. Analysis reveals the wood to be cottonwood. The adobe bricks are similar to those described in historical records.*

Fort Hall Monument.



Additional survey objectives were to determine the extent of archeological deposits and establish whether these deposits remain intact and possess archeological integrity. A variety of artifacts—items of Indian manufacture, pipes, buttons, glass beads, pottery shards, bottle glass, stove parts, hooks, nails, gunflints, horseshoes, and even an Army belt buckle—closely corroborate the architectural subsurface features. The findings were conclusive that the Fort site remains intact and does possess significant research potential.

A number of recommendations for future work at the Fort Hall National Historic Landmark are also offered in the event future investigations are initiated or approved by the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes' Fort Hall Business Council. These recommendations include: preparation of a site topographic map, completion of a remote sensing survey of the Fort Hall site, and the creation by the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes of an archeological repository for the records and artifacts from the 1993 excavations, past investigations (including private collections of Fort Hall materials, if they exist), and future investigations. (It should be noted that not all of these recommendations involve excavations and all are presented with the intent of promoting sensitive site stewardship and preservation.)

In conclusion, the findings of the AHS archeological excavations do not suggest changing the physical boundaries of the Fort Hall National Landmark property. Therefore, plans for any land-altering activities located within Landmark boundaries should take into consideration the archeological resources documented by the test excavations and those projected by the National Register of Historic Places nomination form for the site. This document should be submitted to the appropriate review agencies for their comment prior to initiation of any land-altering activities.

Photos courtesy Shoshone-Bannock Tribes.